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ABSTRACT

This article reports a survey of members of the International Toy Library Association and others in order to describe the international toy library/lekotek movement today. Information from 37 countries was evaluated and the similarities and differences among the toy libraries/lekoteks identified, as well as the various philosophies, aims, and activities. Three main types of toy library/lekotek are described: (1) community oriented toy libraries; (2) lekoteks for children with disabilities; and (3) toy libraries that function as a cultural, social and recreational center. The common emphasis on the importance of play in child development is stressed. The lack of toy libraries in developing countries is noted, and the need to develop such services in these countries is considered. (Contains 19 references.) (DB)

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Toy Libraries/Lekoteks in an International Perspective

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This study is a survey describing the international toy library movement today. This movement includes both toy libraries and lekoteks. The objective for carrying out the survey is to compile a comprehensive description of the toy libraries/lekoteks throughout the world. The descriptive study is based on a questionnaire and information material from 37 countries. The similarities and differences among the toy libraries/lekoteks are discussed, as well as the philosophies, aims and activities. Three main types are described: community oriented toy libraries, lekotek for children with disabilities and toy libraries that function as a cultural, social and reactional center. Future development of the toy library concept is discussed.

Key words: Toy library — lekoteks — international investigation — child disability

What is a toy library/lekotek?

1. A toy library is a service that provides members with the opportunity for shared play and the loan of toys. A toy library can be operated by individuals, charitable organizations, local, regional or national governments, or any other such agency or group. Members of toy libraries can be children, parents, grandparents, childcare providers, educators and/or school children, hospital staff and/or patients, or any other person or persons interested in toys and play.
2. Toy libraries, as often as possible, are to serve as a community resource, offering information, guidance and support to members in addition to the loan of toys.
3. Toy libraries serve people without regard of race, sex, age, handicap, religion, language, or natural origin. (The International Toy Library Association).

Even though there exists an international commitment which states the general objectives for toy libraries it is difficult to define what a toy library is. The definition of toy library varies in different countries dependent on circumstances in each country. In many countries the term lekotek is used and therefore this term is used when it is especially called for in this study. In order to fully understand the organization of the toy libraries in a country, a basic knowledge of the organization of the social welfare system, child care system, habilitation system and the culture is essential. It is, however, beyond the scope of this study to make a deeper analysis of those issues.

Background

The oldest toy library in the world would appear to be the Los Angeles County Toy Loan program in Los Angeles, California, USA (Mayfield, 1990). This program started in

the economic depression years of the 1930's, and has been in operation ever since then. The lekotek concept was founded in Sweden and Scandinavia over 25 years ago. The first lekotek for children with disabilities was opened in Stockholm by concerned parents and teachers (Bjorck-Åkesson, Brodin, Hellberg & Lindberg, 1988, Stensland Junker, 1971). At about the same time the first lekotek in Norway was started July, 1984. In the late sixties the first toy library was established in England (de Vincentis, 1984; Stensland Junker, 1975). The growth of toy libraries/lekoteks has been rapid during the last decade. Today there are toy libraries/lekoteks throughout the world in industrial as well as developing countries.

Common to all toy libraries is the emphasis on play as a means for development, and the work of enthusiastic toy librarians, professional or volunteer, who have taken on the challenge of making play available and beneficial to parents, children and society (Bjorck-Åkesson & Brodin, 1991; Head & Walker, 1987; Nimnicht & Brown, 1972; Sinker 1985).

Although the words toy library and lekotek sometimes are used synonymously, it is necessary to make a distinction between the concepts. When the word lekotek is used, children with disabilities are usually the focus for the services offered (Edmonds, 1985; Lear, 1986; Sinker, 1985). There is also an emphasis on individual training of the child and parent by a well-trained special education teacher, called a lekotek leader (deVincentis, 1984; Juul, 1984). Lekoteks are often affiliated with a habilitation center or diagnostic and treatment center as a part of the assessment and educational services offered by the center (McLane, 1986). Lekoteks are most often for preschool children, and many lekoteks concentrate on the very young child. At lekotek the use of play and toys are adapted to each child's special needs (Jeffrey & McConkey, 1981; Johnson, 1978). The role of the lekotek leader is to improve each child's potential through the use of play. The lekotek concept in its original form has mainly found expression in the Scandinavian countries. Other countries that have adapted this concept are Australia, Japan and Korea. In many other countries, such as the United States, some of the toy library programs have this form, but in combination or parallel with other forms.

The word toy library refers to a library for toys where the role of the toy librarian is to find toys and games that are beneficial to children of different ages. Toys and games may enhance communication and cooperation between children, between children and parents and also between families. This idea is based on the thought that parent-child interaction is essential for good development early in life. Today toy libraries have a role in many different areas, such as family support, mental health, helping children at risk, in bringing play back to its cultural roots, or simply giving handicapped or non-handicapped children a place to meet and play. This wider role for toy libraries has called into question the very name toy library. In some countries alternative names have been adopted. For example, the British toy library organization now is called "Play Matters", and in Canada many toy libraries have grown into "Family Resource Centers".

McConkey (1978) suggested that although toy libraries are an artifact of developed, affluent societies, this should not be the case because toy libraries offer much more than toys. Above all, toy libraries promote the attitude that play is a way to enhance communication and cooperation, and helps the growing generation to work for peace and a harmonious world. Play is a moderator of the child's development, and there is a great need for play in all children (Brodin, 1991; Newson & Newson, 1979).

Aim of the study

The aim of this study is to make description of toy librarie/lekoteks throughout the world. This study will give a description of the state of the art in the toy library/lekotek movement. Future perspectives and development possibilities will be discussed, as well as similarities and differences between toy libraries/lekoteks in different countries.

METHOD

To start the international investigation, a letter was sent to all link persons (ITLA contact persons), and to some personal contacts in all countries known to have toy libraries, with a request to send an address list of the toy libraries of their country. The persons contacted were also requested to send written

information such as brochures and pamphlets. Letters were also sent to the presidents of OMEP in different countries with a request for information on toy libraries. In all, about 200 letters were sent to persons in about 70 countries.

A short questionnaire was then sent to all contacts, with questions on how, by whom and when the first toy library was started in the country, the main objectives of the toy libraries in the country, the organization of the toy libraries, how many toy libraries/lekoteks there are in the country, who is eligible for the service, group activities, localities and staff etc.

Some countries have sent elaborate documentation such as books, reports, photos and research about toy libraries. Some have sent complete personal descriptions of the toy libraries in the country. Others have sent a letter that describes the toy library in a short and formal way, and others have answered the short questionnaire and sent addresses to the toy libraries in the country. From some countries we have received a large amount of unstructured material. Information from newsletters, publications such as articles in journals and also brochures and pampnlets has also been used as a basis for the investigation. Personal visits in combination with written material are the basis for the decsription from a few countries.

Some countries have submitted descriptions of programs similar to toy libraries. Those descriptions have been included, since new development often springs from such activities. Some of those countries may wish to build up toy libraries, but do not have the economic requisites to do so.

A qualitative description is made of the toy libraries in each country, with emphasis on the background, objectives, organisation, function, activities and target group for the toy library movement. For a detailed description of the toy libraries in each country see Bjorck-Åkesson, Brodin, Hellberg, Lindberg and Sinker (1990).

RESULTS

At the onset of the project, it seemed that it would be difficult to describe a toy library in general terms. After going through the material this impression has been confirmed. Each toy library or toy library system is unequally influenced by the special conditions, needs and development of its particular country, and is colored by each country's social and cultural system. Sometimes a toy library is a product of a region, a community or even the creativity of a special person. However, all toy libraries acknowledge the immense value of play for the growing generation.

It should be recognized that the frames of reference differ between countries and cultures, and also that the history of the toy libraries varies. An analysis of the background to the toy library movement in the historical, economic, political and social system of each particular country would have been necessary to make a complete analysis of the philosophies of the toy libraries in each country. Although it is difficult to try to describe a typical toy library, it is possible to recognize some major types of toy libraries.

There are more than 4500 toy libraries and lekoteks in 31 countries on all continents. There is an overrepresentation of Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian countries, probably reflecting the fact that toy libraries and lekoteks originated in these societies. Six countries have expressed a wish to start toy libraries (Fiji, Hungary, Jamaica, Philippines, Poland, and Seychelles). Some of these countries have current activities that are similar to or benefit from adopting the toy library concept. Some of those countries report financial difficulties as a reason for not being able to realize their ambition of starting a toy library.

The number of toy libraries in a country varies. Countries with more than 200 toy libraries are Australia, Canada, Finland, France, Great Britain, Japan, Norway, Switzerland and the United States. These countries often have toy libraries for both handicapped and non-handicapped children. Examples of countries with one or a few toy libraries are the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Jordan, Korea and Zimbabwe. In those countries the toy libraries are almost exclusively lekoteks, meaning they are educational and therapeutic centers for children with disabilities.

At least three major types of toy libraries emerge:

* Toy libraries that are community oriented
* Lekoteks for children with special needs
* Toy libraries with social and cultural programs

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Community oriented toy libraries are for example found in Canada, the United States, New Zealand, Great Britain, Australia and Finland. However, in those countries there are also toy libraries for children with special needs. Community based toy libraries often offer the families possibilities to receive advice on play and toys and offer new learning activities for children.

* In Canada there are more than 200 toy libraries open to all children. The toy libraries are operated on a public lending model or a community oriented parent-child resource model. They are often part of a parent educational program aimed at teaching parents to play and use toys effectively in order to foster development and interaction and other skills such as cognitive and language skills.

* In the United States an increasing number of public libraries are building up a toy collection where children and families may borrow toys just like they borrow books.

* In New Zealand most toy libraries are community based. The focus is on the parent as the child's first and most important teacher.

* In Australia the main objective for community based toy libraries is to provide play opportunities and play materials, and to give advice and support to parents and children.

* In Finland almost every community has a toy library that lends toys to the family day-care homes.

* In Great Britain a growing number of toy libraries open their doors to all children in the area, and include special toys for special needs children in their stock. The premises are often used for different activities for example, providing toys for babies, pensioneers' clubs, and lunches.

Most toy libraries offer different kinds of group activities and in some countries toy libraries have grown into parent child resource or support centers, particularly in Canada, Australia. Community based toy libraries have an important social function, and their development is an offshoot of the rapid social changes in those industrial countries during the last 20 years. Family patterns have shifted. Today, small families are common, and the extended family has become the exception in much of the Western world. The rate of divorce has increased, and new family constellations are more common. All this has increased the demand for support services, and toy libraries are one of the important forms of available support.

The second category of toy libraries mentioned is that of **lekotek for children with special needs**. In all, 21 countries have adopted the lekotek concept. Half of these limit services to children with disabilities while the other half provide toy libraries for non-disabled children as well. In countries providing services for children with disabilities only, there seems to be a move towards integrating specialized services with more generic services. The trend seems to be to expand the services to community preschools and schools. Lekotek are for example found in all the Scandinavian countries, in Japan, Korea, Australia, Brazil, Great Britain, the United States, Canada, and France.

The lekotek most often provide services for the very young child with special needs. The interaction between the lekotek leader and the child is of major importance, and stimulating the child to own activity is seen as vital. Helping the child to discover his or her own abilities and making it visible to the parents is a major goal for the services. Development is seen as gradual, coming in small steps, and it is the task of the lekotek leader to see to that development progress. Assessment and treatment is seen as teamwork, and cooperation with other instances that care for special needs children is part of the services. Often lekotek leaders have a great area to cover, and it is not uncommon that she drives 200 kilometres to visit a family. Iceland is unusual as it comes to lekotek services. It is the only country that has passed a law where services from the lekotek are icluded.

The third category of toy libraries is aimed at the **toy library as a cultural social and recreational center**. Recreational and social activities are offerend to children of all ages. Examples of such toy libraries are found in Italy, France, Switzerland, and Belgium.

The Italian toy library movement builds on the concept of play as a mean for deep change in society and emphasizes the cultural traditions of play as opposed to an "international" way of playing using commer-

cialized toys. At the toy library everybody can try, make and lend toys and games. The toy libraries also are places for festivals and artistic activities. In Hungary, there are toy exhibitions, workshops and toy making sessions reminiscent of the Southern European toy libraries. The cultural value of play and toys is stressed, and the aim is to discover, save and enrich Hungarian play and toy culture.

To sum up, the toy libraries in Southern Europe are notable for having a primary function of providing social and cultural meeting places for people of different ages. In these countries, both play and games are seen as important for the development of the child and for people in society at large. There is an emphasis on traditional toys and games rather than "international" commercialized toys and games. The making of toys is also part of these programs. Young and old people gather to attend workshops on different themes to make traditional toys together. The discovery of differences between people and creativity is a focus for these toy libraries, and the toy library's function is as a place for socializing without imposed limits. The recreational need of older children are especially provided for at these toy libraries.

In some countries **toy lending libraries** can be found. An example of this is the Los Angeles County Toy Loan. It has been in continuous operation since the 30's. It is also the largest toy library in the world, with more than 35.000 toys to lend. All toys are donated and repaired by volunteers. It loans toys to poor children and have a program to encourage these children to return the toys. After a certain number of toys are succesfully returned the child gets to choose a toy to keep.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The differences between toy libraries, while vast, are not fundamental. The two fundamental essences of toy libraries is that they all use play and toys to support childrens' development. Thus, play is the keyword for all toy libraries and the value of play is central.

In toy libraries, play and toys are strongly associated. Toys are often a starting point for cognitive and creative activity. However, toys are not an end in themselves. Toys are tools that encourage and promote play. In many toy libraries it is emphasized that the right material at the right time encourages a child's development. At the lekoteks for disabled children toys are used as instruments for change in an educational or therapeutic program. The challenge for the lekotek worker is to choose toys that engage the child at an appropriate developmental level. At some toy libraries the toy librarians help the parents to select appropriate toys and playmaterials and offer parents and children opportunities to experiment with carefully chosen toys before they buy them.

In countries that are in the process of starting toy libraries the acquisition of toys may present a problem in itself. Finances and the possibilities for funding varies, and these issues are resolved in different ways. Banks and private cooperations may finance the start of toy libraries. Volunteers may work at fund raising in various ways. The government or community may assist in the process of getting started, or international organizations may be involved in establishing toy libraries. Charity organizations also play an important part in funding of toy libraries. A good example of the way culture influences financing is the situation reported from a rural part of China, where authorities donated a small herd of cattle as a basic fund for starting a toy library.

The very word toy libraries has been questioned, since today the main task of the toy library/lekotek movement is not only to lend toys and equipment but above all to support children and families for a good life in a rapidly changing world. There are few toy libraries in developing countries, and indeed it is difficult to talk about the importance of play when children are living under poor conditions and are starving. But, once basic needs of food and shelter are met, play will become a need, and toy libraries are an exceptionally effective way to provide for this need.

One important future task in the international work will be to find ways to encourage and invite developing countries into the network of organizations working with children's play and toys. Toy libraries are meant to be beneficial to children and families in society. The general goal of toy libraries is to use play and toys to share experiences and communicate, and to provide an introduction to social relations. This goal shows the universality of the concept. A toy library is a good notion because it is infinitely flexibe, and ad-

apts to the social, economical and cultural realities of its community. It is this inherent flexibility that makes it difficult to define what a toy library is. Just as in play, there is no "correct" way to be a toy library.

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J. BRODIN, E. BJÖRCK-ÅKESSON: HERNE, POŽIČOVNE HRAČIEK A LEKOTÉKY (HERNE PRE POSTIHNUTÉ DETI) V MEDZINÁRODNOM POHĽADE

Štúdia je prehľadom opisujúcim medzinárodnú činnosť v oblasti požičovní hračiek a herní v súčasnosti. Toto hnutie sa zaoberá požičovňami hračiek aj lekotékami (herne pre postihnuté deti). Cieľom štúdie je podať podrobný opis herní/lekoték vo svete. Táto popisná štúdia vychádza z dotazníkov a informačných materiálov z 37 krajín. Rozoberajú sa spoločné a rozdielne znaky, ako i metodika, ciele a činnosti herní/lekoték. Opisujú sa tri hlavné druhy herní: miestne (zamerané okrem iného aj na poradenskú činnosť pre rodičov), lekotéky pre postihnuté deti a herne slúžiace ako kultúrne, spoločenské a rekreačné centrá. Hovorí sa aj o ďalšom koncepčnom vývoji herní.

Kľúčové slová: Požičovňa hračiek — lekotéky — medzinárodný výskum — disabilita detstva.